

The World's International Freshwater Agreements



Water is one of the most widely shared resources on the planet and the most vital for human survival after oxygen. Scientifically credible and up to date information on international basins is critical for governance, management, and improving international relations. Of particular concern to the international community are potential conflicts over shared sources of water. However, water also has the capacity to unite people and states with shared resources. Although the cry of 'water wars' has become increasingly common in the media, the analysis shows that treaties, not wars, are the historical norms.

The World's International Basins

Currently, there are 263 rivers that either cross or demarcate international political boundaries with following continental distribution:

Europe	69	North & Central America	40
Asia	57	South America	38
Africa	59		

These international basins are distributed over 145 countries, with 33 countries having more than 95% of the territory in the basins. They contain 50% of the earth's land surface; 60% of the global freshwater; and 40% of the world's population.

Water-Related Treaties

- The first recorded water related treaty was signed in 2500 B.C.
- Since then, more than 3600 international water related treaties have been documented, a vast majority of these agreements concerning navigational issues, along with a growing number addressing water as a limited and consumable resource, boundary delineation or fisheries related matters.
- More than 400 water agreements have been signed since 1820 related to water as a limited and consumable resource (excluding transportation, boundary delineation, or fisheries related matters).

Future Vulnerabilities and Opportunities

While a review of historical agreements highlights a number of positive developments, institutional vulnerabilities remain. Notably, 158 of the world's 263 international basins lack any type of cooperative management framework. Furthermore, of the 106 basins and water institutions, approximately two-thirds have three or more riparian states, yet less than 20% of the accompanying agreements are multilateral.

Moreover, treaties with substantive references to water quality management, monitoring and evaluation, conflict resolution, public participation and flexible allocation methods remain in the minority. As a result, most existing international agreements continue to lack the tools necessary to promote long term, holistic water management.

Learning from the past, future cooperative opportunities could be built by incorporating the following:

- Adaptable management structure
- Clear and flexible criteria for water allocation and quality
- Equitable distribution of benefits
- Detailed conflict resolution mechanisms

Source: The new UNEP report "Atlas of International Freshwater Agreements," produced in cooperation with the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations and Oregon State University, USA.



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